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THE TREATMENT OF INFERIORS IN ISRAEL.¹

A man shall be :
As a hiding-place from the wind,
As a covert from the tempest,
As streams of water in a dry region,
As the shadow of a great rock
In a weary land.

—Isa. 32:2.

Thus does one prophet suggest what a man of resources should be to those in need of protection. There are always those in times of stress, when society is disorganized, as was the case in the writer's day, who need a hiding-place from evil men, a refuge from calamity, or a retreat in which they can recuperate their native strength. Such a hiding-place, such a refuge, such a retreat, he would have the strong and resourceful man to be to the unprotected. It is worthy of note that he used almost the same words with which upon another occasion he spoke of Jehovah's protection :

For thou hast been a stronghold to the poor,
A stronghold to the needy in his distress,
A refuge from the storm,
A shadow from the heat,
When the blast of the terrible ones
Is as a storm which throws down a wall.

—Isa. 25:4.

In another place the same prophet declares that the righteous man, the man whose fast is acceptable to Jehovah, is one who brings the poor who have been cast out into his own home (58:7). He asserts further that his ideal man should clothe the naked, as a part of his work of mercy as a protector of the needy (58:7). Another prophet who gives us a picture of his conception of the just man declares that he, among other things, fails not to cover the naked with a garment (Ezek. 18:7, 16). So, too, the first prophet mentions the feeding of the hungry as

¹ This paper is one of a series of papers soon to appear in a volume on *The Social Teaching of the Prophets*.

an obligation which rests upon the righteous man (Isa. 58:7, 10). Here again the second agrees with him (Ezek. 18:7, 16). This was in accord with one of the many beneficent provisions of the deuteronomic law: "If there be with thee a poor man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates in thy land which Jehovah thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy poor brother: but thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him: thou shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth" (Deut. 15:7, 8).

The resourceful man was also to strengthen and encourage the weak (Isa. 35:3, 4). This was what Job had done, according to one of his friends:

Thou hast strengthened the weak hands,
Thy words have upheld him who was falling,
And thou has reinforced the feeble knees.

— Job. 4:3, 4.

In doing this the righteous man was to reassure the timid and fearful (Isa. 35:4; 40:1). This last obligation was not a light one at a time when life was terribly unsettled and insecure owing to the prevailing lawlessness and the hostility of neighboring peoples (Jer. 6:25; 35:11; 37:11; 42:16; 50:16; 52:13; Ezek. 11:8). The manifold efforts of the prophets themselves to induce their people to lay aside all fear reveal the need of the reassurance felt by all classes, and by none more than the poor and ignorant and superstitious. It would seem also that the want of moral stamina on the part of many, owing to the prevailing impurity, had something to do with the want of heart among the people and their consequent need of reinforcement (Isa. 1:5).

In their concern for the poor the prophets insisted especially that the widows and the fatherless of their people be not oppressed, or made to suffer in any way. With considerate kindness they were to be treated, and wrong was never to be done them (Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zach. 7:10). Here again, it is worthy of note, they do not go beyond the humane provisions of the early codes (Exod. 22:22-24; Deut. 24:17-22). It must, however, have greatly ameliorated the lot of these poor unfortunates to have had such stalwart friends as these always

standing up for their rights before Jehovah in accordance with the time-honored customs and laws of their people which base men were prone to ignore ; for then, as still it is true, the personal element counted for quite as much as the legal.

Justice was also demanded for the poor, both in the treatment of them and in the judgments rendered in the local tribunals before which they came, or were brought. Of one who is commended, it is said he judged the cause of the poor and needy, and that in consequence of his rectitude as a judge it was well with him. It is added that in so doing he showed his knowledge of Jehovah, which is apparently an intimation that he revealed by his mercy in judging the poor the fact that he conceived of his God as the pitiful friend and defender of the poor (Jer. 22:16). This agrees with the emphasis which another places upon justice being vouchsafed the poor on the part of the righteous man ; as it agrees with all prophetic thought on the subject (Ezek. 18:8, 16 ; 33:15).

In two other directions the treatment of the poor in its ideal is presented and insisted upon: the pledge of the debtor was to be restored, and interest and increase were not to be exacted. As to the former, it was customary, it seems, to demand of the debtor some security. Usually this pledge seems to have been some commodity, some garment, or ornament, the transaction being akin to those of our pawnshops today. Such pledges were to be restored by the creditor upon the payment of the debt on the part of the poor. This was a wise provision on the part of the earliest known Israelitish law code (Exod. 22:26, 27), a provision which was re-emphasized by the deuteronomic law (24:12, 13), which also provided that a widow's garments were not to be so taken in any case, as a man's hand-mill was not, because it was essential to his very life (24:6, 17). It would seem that in the late time there was a disposition on the part of many to regard with disfavor those who showed any want of feeling in exacting pledges of the poor. In the book of Job we read of those who drove away the ass of the fatherless and took the ox of the widow in pledge, as men who were considered mean and contemptible (24:3). The sentiment of the prophetic writers was against, rather than in favor of, a man's receiving

pledges of any kind at the hands of the poor. The needy of their day had so little that the chances were, if anything were demanded of them as security for a debt, they must in consequence suffer seriously. There certainly was in the other direction of which we have spoken no question as to their requirements in the treatment of the poor. They must not be made to pay interest on money loaned them; and apparently they were not to share the produce of the little land they tilled with those of whom they secured it (Ezek. 18:8, 17; Jer. 15:10; Isa. 24:2). This was in accord with the Book of the Covenant and the deuteronomic law; although a Hebrew might, according to that law, exact interest of a foreign resident. It would appear that the priestly law was even more lenient: "If thy brother become poor, and his hand fail with thee; then thou shalt uphold him; as a stranger and sojourner shall he live with thee. Thou shalt take no interest of him or increase; but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee. Thou shalt not give him thy money upon interest, nor give him thy food for increase" (Lev. 25:35-37). It is reasonable to conclude that the prophets were as humanitarian in their sentiments as the framers of the priestly law. Every utterance of theirs upon the subject points this way.

Closely connected with the prophetic ideal of the treatment of the poor is that of the treatment of captives of war, of slaves, and of servants. Though they may have been inferior relatively in point of numbers to slaves as a class, there seem to have been hired servants, male and female, in the days of the prophets, as there had been earlier. It is, however, impossible to distinguish always between the two classes in the prophetic literature, because the same terms appear to have been used very frequently to designate both the bond and the free servants. But it is not necessary for us to do so in discussing the question of the treatment of these inferiors.

It is unlikely that the Hebrews secured many captives of war during the time of the prophets, save toward the close of the period in the days of the Maccabees. They were themselves the captives who were forced to fall into the trains of foreign devastators of their land, or they gave up their sons and daugh-

ters to the enemies of their country; instead of being permitted to enjoy such despoliation of their neighbors' dominions. Only occasionally, even in the great imaginative passages of their writings, do we find anything which appears to favor the treatment of captives as freemen (Isa. 56:7; 61:1). The contrary seems to have been expected and encouraged (Isa. 14:2; 49:23, 24; 61:5). Nevertheless these men were all to be treated humanely. Anything in the nature of severity or unkindness was frowned upon by these ethical teachers who professed to speak for their God.

That the prophets knew what it usually meant for delicately reared people to be taken as captives of war and carried as slaves into foreign parts is painfully evident from their writings. One prophet speaks of the people of Egypt, upper and lower, being taken, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with their buttocks stripped to their shame (Isa. 20:4). Another, in speaking of the fall and spoliation of Nineveh, pictures the city as a delicately reared woman who goes forth with her maids, dishonored and abased:

She is made bare, she is carried away;
Her maids mourn for her as with the voice of doves,
Tabering upon their breasts.

— Nahum 2:7.

Another prophetic writer in similar strains speaks of Babylon as a woman who has fallen from her lofty estate to become a captive and a mill-wench:

Come down, and sit in the dust,
O virgin daughter of Babylon;
Sit upon the ground without a throne,
O daughter of the Chaldeans:
For thou shalt no more be called tender and delicate.
Take the millstones, and grind the flour;
Remove the veil, take off the skirt,
Uncover the leg, pass through the waters.
Thy nakedness shall be uncovered;
Yea, thy shame shall be seen.
I will take vengeance, and will absolve none.
Sit thou silent, or get thee into darkness,
O daughter of the Chaldeans,
For thou shalt no more be called, the lady of kingdoms.

— Isa. 47:1 ff.

Despite the abrupt transitions of this impassioned poetry, or it may be just because of them, we feel the unutterable woe of the one who is thus reduced. It is to the praise of the prophets of Israel that in a time when captives were often, if not usually, shamefully treated, they demanded humaneness in the treatment of such.

As with captives, so with slaves and servants generally; they insisted on merciful oversight and treatment. They were wont to demand that the provisions of the early codes as to slavery and the care of servants be enforced, though they lifted their demands upon high ethical and religious grounds. At times they encouraged the emancipation of slaves, especially if they chanced to be Hebrews, and even demanded their liberation if their term of servitude had expired (Jer. 34:9-14; Isa. 58: 6; *cf.* Isa. 42:7); but usually their efforts were directed toward the amelioration of their lot. It is likely that nowhere did the elevation of their teaching run more directly counter to the common practice of their people, especially the wealthier classes.

By the Hebrews aliens or foreigners—"strangers" or "sojourners" they were usually called—were naturally regarded as inferiors, though they might come from lands more cultured than their own. Inasmuch as they were so regarded, the prophets, as men whose sentiments led them to espouse the despised and the oppressed, seem to have insisted on mercy and kindness here. In insisting that aliens be not oppressed or unkindly treated, as they did (Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Isa. 56:3 ff.; Ezek. 44:7, 9; 47:22, 23; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5), they placed themselves alongside of the deuteronomists. On the whole, the deuteronomic law had been friendly to such. At certain points, it is true, it favored the native at the expense of the foreigner, probably in part because their code represented the crystallization of certain time-honored customs, as well as the decisions delivered at old sanctuaries. They were not themselves to eat the carcass of any animal that had died of itself a natural death; but they might give it, or sell it, to an alien (Deut. 14:21). They were not to charge their Hebrew brethren interest on money loaned them; but they might collect interest of aliens (Deut. 23:19, 20). Nor were

they to appoint over them to civil or judicial positions such as aliens; as they were not to intermarry with them (Deut. 17:15; 25:5). There is nothing in the prophets to lead us to believe they did not hold such provisions to be reasonable. Certainly a solitary passage in a highly imaginative prophetic utterance should not be pressed too far (Isa. 56:3-8). Very likely they all believed a time was coming when through circumcision foreign peoples would enter their fold. In their day it was not to be; so they stood by the deuteronomic law, and forbade aliens the right of citizenship. To these ethical teachers, so long as their own people were few and weak, it seemed the only safe way of handling the perplexing immigration problem of their time. They might consider the Assyrian and Chaldean policy of colonization well enough for them. They surely must have rejoiced that their own people had fared so well in Babylonia. But they could hardly be expected to urge a like liberal policy at home; and they would have been the last men among their people, we may be sure, to go beyond such a policy and encourage anything like municipal domination or control on the part of an alien population in any one of their cities, though they might urge submission to a foreign power that had made conquest of their people, notwithstanding the fact that such doctrine might render them the most unpopular men of their land and time.

There remains one class of unfortunates, a class that could never have been large, of which to speak. We refer to the prisoners, who must have been for the most part their own people. The lot of prisoners in those times in Israel was exceptionally severe, owing in part to a want of interest in them, it may be, among those in authority, who could have had no systematic way of caring for them, and in part to the nature of the prisons themselves. These frequently were underground rooms or vaults; and were vile, damp places (Isa. 24:22; Jer. 38:6 ff.). Even when they were above ground, houses of restraint, or houses of the bound, those cast into them must have suffered frightfully through filth and neglect. The prophets from the nature of their writings say little about these poor unfortunates, but the little they do say is significant. In the new

day which was to dawn upon Israel deliverance was to be vouchsafed them (Zech. 9:11; Isa. 42:7; 49:9; 61:1). This leads us to believe that through injustice and oppression the most of these unfortunates were incarcerated. Promises of deliverance would not have been made prisoners had not those who made them felt the need of the amelioration of the lot of such. Undoubtedly with another they could have spoken of the life of prisoners in Sheol, the sad and dank underground abode of the dead, as a relief from the life of woe they had known in the flesh:

There the wicked cease from troubling;
There the weary are at rest.
There the prisoners are at ease together;
They hear not the voice of the task-master.
The small and great are there;
And the slave is free from his master.

—Job. 3:17-19.

We may say concerning all who were regarded inferiors—the poor, including the widows and the fatherless, slaves and servants, strangers and prisoners—that the emphasis of the prophets was upon justice rather than upon charity. In cases of extreme want or suffering the poor were to be relieved: they must be fed and clothed and furnished shelter. But the insistence was upon justice, apparently in the thought that such would ordinarily be able to eke out a livelihood, if they were not defrauded or injured. The prophets were not men who encouraged the making of paupers or dependants. They evidently believed in self-help. If only their rights were secured them, they were sure the poor would in most instances get along tolerably; but justice must be tempered with mercy. The unfortunate must not be handled in a hard and loveless way (Hos. 12:6; Zach. 7:9, 10). The prophets went so far as to remind their hearers that it was justice and mercy in their dealing with such which would commend them to their God, rather than more frequent sacrifices.

“For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6), one of the prophets made his God to say. While another inquires:

Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah,
And bow myself before the most high God ?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
With calves of a year old ?
Will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams,
Or with ten thousands of rivers of oil ?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul ?

To these questions the prophet finds but one answer :

He hath showed thee, O man, what is good ;
What doth Jehovah require of thee,
But to do justly, and to love mercy,
And to walk humbly with thy God ?

—Mic. 6:6-8; cf. Isa. 1:11-20.

Words which are richly suggestive today must have had tremendous significance in those times. The ideal of conduct which they hold up was not one, it should be noticed, that sought to cast discredit upon sacrifice. The offering of the ordinary and lawful sacrifices they encouraged ; while at the same time they called for justice and insisted upon mercy in all the relations of life, among all classes ; but especially did they demand it of those comfortably circumstanced in the treatment of their inferiors.

When we pass from a consideration of what the prophets demanded to the actual life of the people, we have to confess that we find the ideal they held up was not realized ; far from it. This is painfully evident to him who reads carefully the prophetic literature. Indeed, we have to confess that the ideal of most of the prophets under this head can be gathered only from their denunciations and warnings. It is the maltreatment and robbery of the poor that they are ever denouncing as they speak of them. The time was one of deceit and fraud in trade and of high-handed robbery, from all of which the poor suffered quite as much as any. This probably accounts very largely for the concern of the prophets. It was because the neediest people suffered most, because they who had least to lose must lose most, because they who could least afford to be defrauded were most likely to be defrauded, that the wrath of the prophets was aroused.

The blood of the innocent poor was ever crying unto Jehovah from the ground (Amos 8:4; Jer. 2:34; 19:4). The oppression of the needy was ever moving the men of Jehovah to grief, or arousing their indignation. When the poor were vexed or oppressed, when they were crushed or trodden under foot, these men came forward with their words of wrath or scorn (Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; Ezek. 18:12; 22:29). Those who set themselves to exterminate the poor, or went no farther than to devise means of injuring them, could not be overlooked by the prophets (Isa. 32:3). The fact is pathetic, but it is interesting to notice that the phrase "to grind the faces of the poor" is as old as the Hebrew prophets. One of them calls his people to account for grinding their faces (Isa. 3:15). Such a charge, like others that were frequently made, could not have been brought forward if the conditions of the poor had not seemed deplorable.

Here, however, they did not stop, for here unfortunately the oppressors of the poor were not content to rest: they kept back the wages of the poor; they let them live in order that they might defraud them of the fruits of their labor. To treat them so was to use them worse than they used their slaves. We need not wonder that the prophets should have demanded that the wages of such be paid them (Isa. 3:14; 10:2; Jer. 22:13; Mal. 3:5). So were the poor preyed upon that the prophets must have felt, as did one of the writers of the Proverbs, that they were defrauded or robbed because they were poor, because they were safe and easy prey. Beyond this fact was another quite as distressing: the poor were denied justice, they were turned aside in the gate (Amos 5:12; Jer. 5:28; Isa. 10:2). Like the deuteronomists the prophets insisted that justice be not denied the poor, and that the widows and fatherless especially be considerately treated in local courts. Looking upon these poor unfortunates as those for whom they were responsible, they labored to secure for them the justice which was so often denied them. It is impossible for us to understand their labors, as they tried to alleviate the lot of such, if we do not take into consideration the fact that they looked upon themselves as men into whose hands their God as the God

of the poor had intrusted the poor. They dared not let those who wronged them go unrebuked. Though humanitarian sentiments had something to do with their labors for these inferiors, their position as prophets, as professed men of Jehovah, may have had more. If so, this gave, among other things, great social significance to their work.

A pertinent question arises just here in connection with the thought of the prophetic espousal of the cause of the poor. It has to do with the moral character, or religious status, of these unfortunates. Were they righteous persons, in whom the interest of the prophets was the more intense because they knew them to be righteous? We come upon a class known as the righteous poor in the Psalms; we may almost say that in the psalmody and the wisdom literature of Israel the words "poor" and "righteous" were practically, as used, synonymous. They certainly were often used to designate one and the same class of men—those who were Jehovah-fearing, who wronged no man, and who, because they scorned to enrich themselves by conformity to standards which they considered reprehensible, or to do things that would have seemed to them like a betrayal of their faith in their God, remained poor, or became and stayed so.

This appears to be what we do find in the prophets, to some extent at least. Not all poor could have been righteous according to the prophetic standards; but many of them unquestionably were. When a prophet speaks of the righteous as being sold for money and the poor for a pair of sandals (Amos 2:6), we may conclude that the righteous referred to were themselves poor. Indeed, it is very likely that the last clause of this indictment was meant to be regarded as practically synonymous with the first:

They sold the righteous for money,
Even the poor for a pair of sandals.

It is presumable that the just, who according to another prophet were turned aside, were poor; and that usually the righteous who were so frequently alluded to as made to suffer were the needy (Isa. 5:23; 57:1; Ezek. 13:22; Hab. 1:4).

The data are of such a character that they cannot easily be

set forth. It is rather the fact that the sympathetic student of the literary prophecy finds himself often in the same atmosphere which he does when he turns to the devotional and wisdom literature of Israel that is to be noted. He finds much in the prophets of the same general character as this from the Psalms:

Help, Jehovah, for the godly man ceaseth;
For the faithful fail from among the children of men.

— 12:1.

All this leads him to assert that to the prophets the poor and the righteous were usually the same. Though there were unquestionably those who were righteous among the prosperous, the circumstances of the time were such that many of the worthiest men were brought low and were trodden under foot.

The prophets, then, were not sentimentalists; but strong men who espoused the cause of the poor, not alone because they were poor, but also because they were usually, if not always, righteous persons, without whom the state would have found it difficult to maintain itself. Their efforts in behalf of the poor were labors which had to do with the welfare of the whole social body. For the well-to-do to exterminate the peasantry and grind out of existence the free artisans would be for them to imperil the life of their people and to extinguish the hope of moral regeneration at home. For after all, though the prophets looked to the *Golah*¹ as the salt, they turned to the peasants and the artisans at home as the mass into which they as salt were to be cast upon their return. The actual workers and producers may have been bondmen for the most part; but the economic well-being of their land was largely in the hands of the poor. It speaks much for the sanity of the social ideals of the prophets that they had the prescience to apprehend this clearly, as it does for their soundness of heart that they set themselves to espouse the cause of those who were regarded by the rich as inferiors in such an age as theirs. God pity the man who can read the prophets of Israel without discovering that many of their utterances were instinct with moral heroism!

Always the poor have needed those who would stand up for

¹ The *Golah* were the Hebrews scattered abroad.

them as their protectors and the champions of their rights; but we do well to inquire if poor men were not more docile than such are today among Germanic and Celtic peoples; if they were not less inclined to rise up in wrath and wreak vengeance on their oppressors and despoilers; if they were not more disposed to suffer and to die rather than to endeavor to maintain their rights and save themselves? The poor among the Hebrews who were then afflicted apparently were not only ill-fitted, as regards resources, to stand up for their rights, but they were too weak and distrustful of themselves to do so. It is noteworthy that the poor are spoken of as the meek or the humble (Amos 2:7; Isa. 11:4; 29:19; 61:1); as it certainly is significant that nowhere in the prophetic literature do we read of the indignation, the anger, or the wrath of the poor as being stirred. It was for them to suffer and wait upon Jehovah. The fact is pathetic, but is all too evident that they had learned their lesson so that naught beyond a cry or a groan is spoken of as escaping them. At rare intervals they may have been stirred to wrath when the worst things were meted out to them; their cry may have been a cry of rage; but what we have to notice is that it was their meekness under loss and wrong that impressed the prophets and, it may be, led them with the greater vehemence to espouse their cause.

EDWARD DAY.

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